

Understanding India

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2. Louis Dumont in his book *Homo Hierarchicus* mentions that the basis of the caste system isn't economic or political inequality but this concept of purity and impurity between the castes. The pure and impure are relative so that what is impure for one caste is pure for others. The lowest caste (if there is one) is the most impure and at the bottom of the hierarchy and people interacting with people of lower caste in any form will be ritually polluted and their caste/religion will be violated. [1] This hierarchy of pure and impure also lay the foundation of what Ambedkar referred to as "graded inequality", a system which is not as black and white as one section being rich and other being poor, or generally privileged vs non-privileged but the privilege is distributed as some sort of gradient between the different castes. Brahmins being at the top of the ladder have privilege with all the rights and are considered the purest but as you move down the ladder, the purity, and privilege of the caste decrease.

The middle castes like Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are both beneficiaries and victims of the caste system. Ambedkar cites graded inequality as a reason that there has been no anti-brahmin uprising because a Kshatriya would never join Vaishyas and Shudras firstly because he is not as victimized as Shudras and Vaishyas and joining lower castes would violate their religious purity. [2]

In Karani village, the orthodox view is that cooked food can only be accepted from someone of an equal or higher caste implying that accepting cooked food from lower castes will pollute your religion.

Also, the pariah caste and other lower castes cannot watch the prayer and rituals done by the Brahmin.

The Reddiar own most land in the village and provide work to most of the lower castes whereas the Brahmins only own the temple land. This is the reason the Reddiar are respected the most, so respected infact that they sometimes also act as the court and settle disputes in the village.

In Karani, the economic status played a major role in caste dynamics. According to Veeramma, the Tombans only used to be a bit higher than them (Pariah) but now they are a lot higher since they became rich. Also Reddiars are above the Brahmins because they are the most landowning caste.

1. Page 60 : Purity, Pollution and Ritual – M Parpola 2000 [<https://journal.fi/store/article/view/51289/15739>]

2. <https://velivada.com/2017/03/26/understanding-graded-inequality-hindu-caste-system-dr-ambedkars-view/>

1. The English term 'caste' is derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word 'casta' which meant race, lineage, tribe or breed. The term caste was first used by Portuguese travelers who came to India at the start of 16th century and used the term to talk about the social dynamics in India. Later it was picked up by other European colonialists and became the official word to refer to the Indian social stratification system during the British rule.

In Hindi, it is usually referred to as 'jati' or 'varna'. Varna is an older system of social stratification mentioned in old Hindu texts most notably the Rig Veda and Manusmriti. Under the varna system, the society is divided into four hierarchies.

Brahmins : Scholars and teachers

Kshatriyas : warriors, leaders

Vaishyas : merchants and agriculturalists

Shudras : Labours

As mentioned in the *Rigvedic Purusha Sukta*, the *Purusha*(cosmic being) was sacrificed and divided into four portions. The brahmins originated from his mouth, the kshatriya from his arms, the vaishyas from his thighs and the shudras from his feet making them impure. [1]

The jati system also known as the caste system today came after the varna system and subdivided the varnas into several groups. In theory, the varna system was not hereditary and was assigned on the basis of 'karma' but the jati system much more rigid than the varna system and was strictly hereditary. So theoretically your jati is the same as the jati of your great ancestors. The jati is maintained through endogamy.

Gotra which are a form of sub-caste usually refers to the clan or lineage that a person belongs to. There is no vertical hierarchy between the gotras. Unlike the varna or jati system in which people can't marry outside their jati, people of the same gotra (sagotra) aren't allowed to marry each other as it is considered inbreeding. [2]

1. <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10090.htm> Verse 11 and 12.

2. <http://www.salagram.net/sstp-Gotras.html>

3. The caste system has been the reason for the oppression of the lower class for centuries now. As Ambedkar mentioned in the Annihilation of Caste, "Caste is not just a division of labor, it is a division of laborers" and there is a need to address and recognize the existence of caste system officially i.e. in the constitution of India. Legislations regarding some kind of reservations can be traced to the colonial period. In 1858 the Government of Bombay Presidency declared that 'all schools maintained at the sole cost of Government shall be open to all classes of its subjects without discrimination. [1]

In 1923, the government decided not to give grants to the institutions that refused to admit the children of the depressed class.

During this time the two major forces taking interest in the issue were Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Gandhi. While both were against caste discrimination, their ideas on countering it were very different. While Ambedkar denounced the whole caste system and the foundations of the caste system which he believed were in ancient Hindu texts and scriptures, Gandhi, being a conservative at heart, had a softer way going about it. At first, he believed that caste system was the natural order of the society and shouldn't be destroyed. Later in mid 1930's he gradually became more radical and believed that caste system should do and the only way for going about it are inter-caste marriages. Even then he didn't criticise the Hindu religion as a whole. Maybe he would have done that if he lived a few more years.

This disparity between ideas became very evident when Ramsay Macdonald, the British Prime Minister, announced the Communal Award that gave Depressed Classes separate electorates for central and provincial legislatures. [2] While Ambedkar celebrated the decision, Gandhi thought that this will create a divide between the depressed classes and the Hindu community. He then proceeded to fast until separate electorates was removed knowing Ambedkar will succumb due to public opinion. In 1932 they signed the Poona Pact which put an end to separate electorates. While the Poona pact increased the reservations for the depressed class significantly, it still put them as second class citizens who were being helped by the owners of the nation aka the upper caste.

After the independence of India, the government decided to give 15% reservation to ST's and 7.5% reservation to ST's, 22% in total. Later in 1979, the Mandal Commission was set up to identify and report on the Socially or Economically backward classes in India. The implementation of this report was historic and one of the biggest events in independent India's history. It reported that 52% of the country's population was comprised of OBC's and that should be the percentage of reservation given to those classes but since the total reservation was capped at 50%, the reservation for OBC was decided at 27% and 22% SC/ST reservation from before the Mandal era was untouched.

When the constitution of India was being shaped, one of the central tension was that whether they should recognize the castes or they should try to abolish the caste system and don't officially recognize them. The latter doesn't affect the upper castes because it has already "encashed" their caste-capital i.e. exploited their caste and made money out of it through the expense of the lower caste but it does not address the oppression faced by the lower castes

over the years and are doing poorly socially and economically and is a huge disadvantage for them.

1. https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/27131/10/10_chapter%204.pdf Page 2
2. https://www.constitutionofindia.net/historical_constitutions/poona_pact_1932__b_r_ambekar_and_m_k_gandhi__24th%20September%201932